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Subject: Dallas Morning News - Railroad Commission meeting on Azle seismic events

So while not acknowledging the Induced Seismicity report, one of the recommended options (shutting in a suspect disposal well) was implemented.

Texas agency reports injection well near Azle shut down

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Questions continue to swirl around the rash of earthquakes in the small farming town of Azle.

An official with the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates oil and gas drilling, testified Tuesday that in November the agency had found an injection well near Azle with unusually high pressure and the well had since been shut down.

Injection wells are drilled deep underground to store waste fluids associated with oil and gas drilling. They have been linked to earthquake activity by scientists for decades.

The agency began inspecting wells within 15 miles of the center of the seismic activity in November, said Ramon Fernandez, deputy director of the Oil and Gas Division. Since Nov. 5, the area around Azle has registered more than 30 earthquakes, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

"All the wells had zero pressure, except for one," Fernandez said. "We found there was pressure and sent a violation letter. We went back out Jan. 2, and the well was shut in ... they're still [fixing] it."

Packed meeting

The testimony came during a packed public meeting at the Railroad Commission. Residents from Azle and Reno, who had boarded a bus at 5 a.m. for the trip to Austin, vented their frustration at the agency for more than an hour.

A young boy asked why they were pumping “poisoned water” underground. Darlia Hobbs questioned whether the earthquakes hadn’t damaged the concrete casings around natural gas wells that keep fracking fluids from leeching into drinking water supplies.

Bill Hoffman even brought a guitar to play his variation on an Elvis Presley standard.

“My hands are shaking; my knees are weak. I can’t seem to stand on my own two feet. I’m in Azle; I’m all shook up,” he sang.

Commissioners and staff tried to assure residents they were doing all they could to determine the cause of the earthquakes. But the significance of the injection well that was shut down remained unclear.

The Railroad Commission declined to make Fernandez or any other officials available to explain the thinking behind the inspections.

Spokeswoman Ramona Nye said in an email there was no evidence the injection well that was shut down “is linked to any seismic activity.”

“Our [staff] routinely inspect area disposal wells when seismic activity is reported in an area to ensure wells are operating within their permit conditions and to determine there is no problem with the wellbore,” she wrote, referring to the hole drilled into the ground.

The well is operated by Finley Resources, an oil and natural gas company in Fort Worth, according to the railroad commission. The company did not respond to a request for comment.

Pressure checks

Pressure checks on injection wells, which can be more than 10,000 feet deep, are standard practice for oil and gas regulators. Typically they're intended to make sure the pressure is not so high as to push contaminated water into the groundwater above the wells, said Steve Horton, a seismologist at the University of Memphis who has studied the link between earthquakes and gas drilling.

But increased pressure in an injection well can cause seismic activity, he said.

"It's possible. But in order to make that case you'd need a lot more information," he said.

The seismic activity is in the heart of the Barnett Shale, one of the country's most prolific natural gas fields. The possible connection between the two is now the subject of a sprawling government inquiry.

House subcommittee

Last week, state Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland, chairman of the House Committee on Energy Resources, announced he was forming a subcommittee to investigate the phenomena. Researchers at Southern Methodist University are deploying seismic sensors around Azle, which will supply data to federal seismologists.

And the Railroad Commission is now in the process of hiring an in-house seismologist, a first for the agency.

"There's quite bit of activity," said Railroad Commission executive director Milton Rister. "It seems to consume half my day every day."

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